

Lee Radzak

Split Rock Lighthouse

Interpretation at Historic Lighthouses

Lighthouse visitors are just as interested in the day-to-day life at a light station as they are in the technical aspects of the keeper's job. An interpreter demonstrates wash day—1920s style.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.

At an annual Children's Day special event at Split Rock, young people are given an opportunity to record impressions of their visit to the lighthouse. Such activities can make their visit more memorable.
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.



The keeper finished cranking the 250-pound cast-iron weights up the 40' weight-way tube running up through the center of the lighthouse. He removed the crank handle from the clockwork mechanism and pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his midnight-blue wool uniform coat and wiped a few smears from the polished brass of the lens assembly. As he took a moment to admire the sparkling prisms of the Fresnel lens he heard strange voices coming up the spiral staircase. An eager family came puffing into the lens room to stare wide-eyed at the glittering 4-1/2 ton marvel of French technology revolving above them. They then turned to look out the window at Lake Superior 160' below. "Welcome to Split Rock Lighthouse," said the keeper. "I'll bet you're wondering why the lighthouse service would build a lighthouse way up on top of this cliff."

This scene could have occurred in the late 1920s as easily as the late 1990s. The major difference is that in the 1990s the "keeper" is a historic site interpreter employed by the Minnesota Historical Society; in the 1920s, he was a lightkeeper employed by the U.S. Lighthouse Service. For the first 14 years the Split Rock keepers and their families led an isolated existence. But in 1924 the North Shore highway was opened from Duluth, Minnesota, to the Canadian border; it ran only a half mile from the light station. By the mid-1930s the head lightkeeper was recording 60,000 visitors annually off the new highway. The lighthouse service told him that he should meet and greet all visitors to the lighthouse in a clean dress uniform. In 1939, when the U.S. Coast Guard assumed responsibility for the country's aids



to navigation, they said that Split Rock was "one of the most frequently visited lighthouses in the United States." Although Split Rock Lighthouse was decommissioned as a navigational aid in 1969, visitors continued to stop at the popular landmark. The light station is now a Minnesota state historic site; preservation and interpretation are the responsibility of the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS). Visitation peaked at 212,000 in 1989, the year of the U.S. Lighthouse Service bicentennial.

With the well-preserved light station and with public interest and high attendance a given, Split Rock was a natural addition to the Minnesota historic site system in 1976. As with all open-air museums, the interpretive program at Split Rock has been developed and customized to fit specific conditions. Visitation patterns, audience interest and demographics, the physical environment of the site, availability of historical and research information, and, of course, financial resources, are among some of the considerations when developing an interpretive plan for any historic site.

For an interpretive program to succeed at a historic lighthouse, the administering entity needs to have a clear vision of what they want visitors to understand about the site. This can only be done by first developing a concise interpretive plan that sets objectives for what story is to be told at the site and how it is to be told. At Split Rock we were very fortunate: when we began research on the site in the mid-1970s, several sons and daughters of the early keepers who actually lived at the light station in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s were helpful in providing us with first-hand information about life at Split Rock. They were a very valuable source of anecdotal information, and even provided written records and early photographs of life

at the lighthouse. This information was corroborated by the official logs for the light station that were kept by the keepers. From these, and other archival sources, we had an excellent base of information on which to build an interpretive program, as well as good documentation for restoration projects that have returned the buildings and grounds to their pre-1924 appearance.

Solid and well-researched documentation provides the fuel that will drive a successful interpretive program. For us, the next step was to look at the resources we had and how best to present them to the visiting public. First, an interpretive staff manual was developed. While this is updated annually, the basic information it contains gives an interpreter a primer in interpretive technique, as well as an in-depth background on the history of lighthouses, shipping, the Great Lakes, the U.S. Lighthouse Service, and Split Rock Lighthouse. A detailed interpretive outline for guided tours is included along with expected learner outcomes for each of the stations on a tour. In-depth staff training, though expensive, is the key to an effective and successful interpretive program. Each spring we hold two full days of training for our entire staff of 22 to 24 employees.

After being open to the public for 20 years, Split Rock Lighthouse historic site's program evolved into one that gives visitors a variety of options for touring the light station. For the casual visitors, self-guiding brochures allow them to see the buildings and grounds of the light station at their own pace and to interact with stationed interpreters as they wish. Hour-long guided tours are led by site interpreters to seven tour stations,

or stops, on the light station. Beginning in the 1996 season, the decision was made to expand our interpretive program to include costumed interpreters who role-play either the keepers or their wives from the time period of 1925. We chose that year as our target date for the first-person interpretation because it was the first year that the new highway allowed tourist access to the isolated light station. The head lightkeeper's log for 1925 shows that the isolated life at Split Rock was chang-

ing and that they were dealing with tourist traffic on a regular basis. The highway is a perfect interpretive vehicle or bridge—excuse the puns—between that historical period and our interpretation of it. Visitors today still travel the same road to see the same lighthouse, and they can relate to the historical connection between the keepers and their early visitors.

Adding a living history component to an interpretive program can greatly enrich a visitor's appreciation and understanding of a site and its content. If done right, first-person, costumed role-playing can be very effective; however, much care, forethought, and a high level of commitment to accuracy must accompany the decision. At Split Rock we had used costumed role playing to a limited extent for special events; because of the very positive reception, we have now incorporated it into our daily interpretation. Every day, three of our seven interpreters portray either a keeper or a wife of a keeper. A limitation at our site is that only the lighthouse and one of the three lightkeeper's dwellings is totally restored to the 1920s, complete with period furnishings, so the first-person interpretation is most effective inside these two buildings.

If living history is to be done with any credibility, it has to be done right. That means no short cuts on costuming—accurate period keepers' uniforms and 1920s vintage reproduction house dresses for the women. Only appropriate jewelry and hairstyles are to be worn by costumed interpreters, and even the language and slang that the interpreters use while in character have to fit the 1920s. Since the time period that we are interpreting at Split Rock is relatively recent we do not portray actual keepers and family members that served at Split Rock Lighthouse. Instead, through extensive research, we have developed composite characters based on historical information specific to Split Rock and generic qualities shared by lightkeepers of the time period. Biographical histories were developed for six fictional characters so that an interpreter is assigned a specific character to portray for the day.

At Split Rock we use a form of modified first-person that we call "my eyes, your eyes." If a visitor asks the "keeper" why there is a light bulb in the lens, the interpreter will drop character enough to say, "To your eyes you see a 1000-watt light bulb that was used after the light station was electrified in 1940, but to my eyes in 1925 it looks like an incandescent oil vapor lamp that burns kerosene." At Split Rock we have found that many visitors have needs and questions that just cannot be answered by someone locked into a different time period. For them we will briefly break

The lives of the Split Rock lightkeepers and their families in the 1920s is portrayed for visitors to the site by present-day interpretive staff and volunteers. Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society.



Split Rock Light Station

Completed by the U.S. Lighthouse Service in 1910, Split Rock Light Station was soon one of Minnesota's best known landmarks. Restored to its 1920s appearance, complete with its 3rd order, bivalve, Fresnel lens and operating clockworks, the lighthouse offers visitors a glimpse of lighthouse life in this remote and spectacular setting. The 10 buildings that comprised the original light station have been restored to their original appearance;

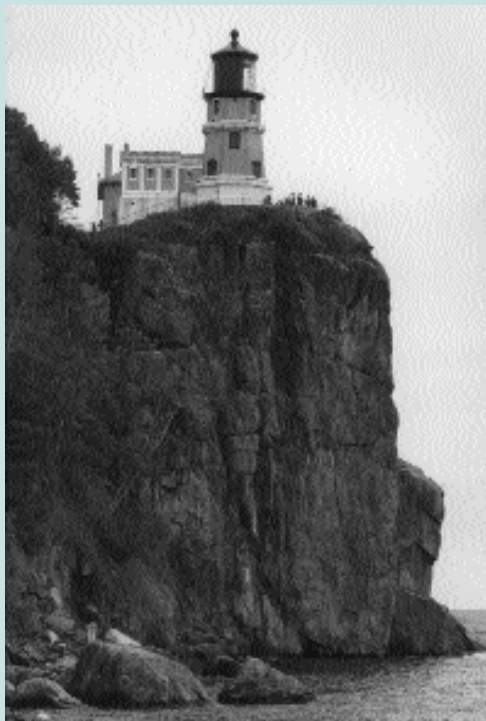
the fog signal building and one of the three light-keeper's dwellings are also open to the public. A history center built in 1986 features an award-winning film; exhibits on navigation, shipwrecks, and Lake Superior; and a museum store.

Split Rock Lighthouse owes its existence to the storms of 1905, especially to a record gale on November 28, that damaged nearly 30 ships on Lake Superior alone.

The under-powered freighters and iron-ore carriers, unable to cope with the northeast winds in excess of 60 miles per hour that raged continuously for more than half a day, were driven across the lake toward the rocky north shore.

Location and Hours. Split Rock Lighthouse Historic Site is located within Split Rock Lighthouse State Park, 45 miles northeast of Duluth on Highway 61. The site is open with a full interpretive program from May 15 through October 15, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily. Winter hours, October 15 through May 15, are Friday through Sunday, noon to 4:00 p.m., with only the history center and the grounds open (closed in December).

Split Rock Lighthouse is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is part of Minnesota's State Historic Site Network that includes 32 sites and is administered by the Minnesota Historical Society.



character if it will help interpret a concept or idea to them.

Additional methods of interpretation can strengthen a site's program. Each historic site has a unique story that should be told. There are many very good methods to facilitate the telling of that story. Interpretive film can be an extremely effective way to illustrate facts and ideas that can be difficult to convey in other ways. In our 22-minute film, "Split Rock Light: Tribute to the Age of Steel," we show how the growth of the Minnesota iron ranges led to the need for lighthouses on Lake Superior. In an age when every visitor relates to video, even short two- or three-minute audio-visual programs can be effective, and made inexpensively. A museum store should also support and reinforce the interpretive theme of the site. Sale items such as period crafts appropriate to the theme of the site and publications will take the visitor one step further in their understanding of the site. An exhibit gallery can provide interactive displays or describe or illustrate ideas that supplement what the interpreters are able to do.

While all of these interpretive tools are a means to an end—understanding the past—we will never be able to recreate history. In some ways interpreting the past is like the mariner studying the lighthouse from the watery distance. Using his compass and his light list for guidance, and hoping that fog or a snow squall do not alter the beam, he keeps an eye to his one true contact with land. The actions of the past are a constant focal point; our interpretations of these actions in the present can affect how clearly we are able to see the past as it truly was.

References

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